

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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**MICHAEL LASLETT OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS,
SEIU LOCAL 925, TEAMSTERS LOCAL 174**

INTERVIEWEE: MICHAEL LASLETT

INTERVIEWER: CINDY COLE

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[00:00:00] CINDY COLE: This is an interview with Michael Laslett for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. The interview is taking place in Seattle, Washington, and the date is November 21, 2016.

Michael, why don't you just go ahead and tell us a little bit about yourself, and your family history, and what would have brought you to the Seattle Labor Chorus?

[00:00:30] **MICHAEL LASLETT:** My name is Michael Laslett. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1962. My mom is from New York—she was born in the Bronx in 1933. My father was born the same year in Watford, England. Both of my parents have politics, and I grew up in a very left-wing and political family.

On my dad's side, he obviously grew up in England. His mom and dad were kind of Christian Socialists. They were progressive Baptists. His dad had served in the British Army in World War I, and was very affected by the treatment of prisoners of war, and had come back, I think, even more disturbed by war and violence. They always voted for the Labour Party in England, back when it was an overtly socialist party.

My mom is from New York. She's Jewish. Her father was actually a first-generation immigrant. Her mom was born in the U.S., but she was only one generation removed from the original immigration story. Her immediate nuclear family was not particularly political, but she had some political folks in her extended family. One of her uncles was a Socialist, was a union organizer. He was the one who convinced her parents to send her to an interracial summer camp one summer to get her out of the City, which was common—I think still is—in New York.

That experience of going to an interracial camp really changed her life. She met Black people for the first time. There was singing, there was culture around kind of civil rights and human rights. That's where she began to become politically aware, and also first began to have her love of folk music.

My parents met when my father came to the States. He was doing a PhD in comparative labor history. He was one of the few people in Britain who actually was interested in American labor history. They met in Chicago. My dad's ability actually to go to college was affected by the fact that the first Labour government took power in England after World War II. Had it not been for that, he probably would not have gone to Oxford, where he went.

My parents met. My mom was going to the University of Chicago. They fell in love, they got married. They were attracted to each other's politics as much as anything else. My sister, Sarah, who was born two years later than I, and I were raised in the civil rights movement. We were taken to marches in Chicago. I marched with Martin Luther King. There are stories of my sister being carried in the arms of a Black woman in one of the marches that my father tells a lot about this woman carrying this very white baby in her arms, walking down the street chanting "Freedom now!"

In 1968, my parents moved to Los Angeles because my dad got a job at UCLA. They immediately became very active in supporting the United Farm Workers Union. So I have personal memories of going to picket lines at Safeway to tell people to boycott lettuce or grapes; me and my sister handing out leaflets to shoppers telling them to boycott.

I remember being on a picket at a nursery and being hosed by the owner, who was really angry at us. I don't remember what we were asking him to do, but something to support the farm workers, and he wasn't willing to do it, so we were picketing.

My parents were very much kind of in the world of socialists and feminists and activists. Lots of our friends and family were either current or former members of either the Communist Party or Trotsky's Party. I joined my first kind of Marxist study group when I was in the ninth grade. That's when I first started calling myself a Socialist.

From very early on, music was part of all of that. I was raised listening to Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. My mom had all of those early, early albums, children's albums that particularly Woody Guthrie made. We would

go to concerts. They were kind of our version of going to church. We'd go to Pete Seeger concerts and sing with thousands of people. We would go to Holly Near concerts. We would go just to the music of the movement at the time. I loved it. It food for my soul, and it was clearly so important to my mother in particular. My mom was the one who really embraced all of that and passed it on to my sister and I.

I went to college at UC Berkeley. Chose it for political reasons, not academic ones. I knew of its political reputation. That's where I wanted to be. I didn't know for sure that I was going to go into the labor movement then. I had obviously grown up in a pro-union family, but Berkeley, when I was there, it was the era of the anti-Apartheid movement. My sister and I both were very involved in that movement. In fact, there's a picture of us singing together at a rally at UC Berkeley as part of the anti-Apartheid movement.

That's when I kind of came into my own politically. I started making decisions on my own about what I thought about politics. I tried to differentiate myself from my parents, not by moving to the right but by moving to the left. I thought that I was further to the left than them, which I was for a little while.

When I got out of college, that's when I was trying to kind of decide. I wanted to do something that was part of social justice. I wanted to make a living at it. I volunteered for a while with a community organization in Oakland, California. That person eventually put me in touch with the Justice for campaign of SEIU, which was in its early days.

And I spoke Spanish. I had learned Spanish, and that's kind of got me into the labor movement. It was very hard then for someone who didn't come from the rank and file to get on the staff of a union. That was unusual. It was my language skills that got me in. They were trying to rebuild these janitors' locals of SEIU that had really atrophied, and they needed people who could organize these new Spanish-speaking workers. The Janitors Union had largely been built on African-American and kind of white ethnic workers, and this new Spanish-speaking workforce was, in some ways, viewed hostilely by the leadership of the unions, and they needed people who would come in and could actually engage those workers.

So, from my earliest days in the labor movement, I had my guitar. I had learned all of those songs from growing up. I would sing them, both in social gatherings of my fellow organizers. I was then quickly recruited to start singing at union meetings, because they figured out that I knew how to do that stuff, and I could do it in both English and Spanish. That became kind of my second personality, or second role in the labor movement. I've done lots and lots of different jobs as a staff person. I've been an organizer, a contract negotiator. I've done international work. I've done lots of different stuff.

But throughout all of that, the second role that I always played in all of my jobs was kind of like the movement troubadour, or the person who knew the movement music. Still, I get recruited to sing at union meetings, I get recruited to sing at retirement parties, I get recruited to sing at labor events, again, in English and in Spanish. It's where I get a lot of my inspiration to keep doing the work that I do. I feel that I pass on that inspiration to other people through the music.

Many people don't know that—particularly working-class people, frankly—that piece of kind of the left's culture that used to be closer to the working-class culture of America is now very, very separated. Working-class people don't learn or sing that kind of music in their own communities, so I'm introducing it, usually for the first time. People are usually really amazed that there is music like that, that talks about those workplace and labor movement issues.

When I moved to Seattle in 1993, I came here to be part of a Teamsters local. I had been already for a while, a few years, active in Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the reform caucus within the Teamsters. Bob Hasegawa

was elected as the head of the [Teamsters] Truckers local in Seattle, and he hired me from the national staff of TDU, where I had been living and working in Detroit—to come and help him figure out run a local. He was a UPS truck driver who had been part of the reform movement for years, but had no experience actually administering a union local.

So, I got hired and I came out. When I was moving out here, I was just making connections and talking to my friends about who knew who in Seattle, and a friend of mine who worked actually in the labor movement in Portland had heard of this duo called Rebel Voices. I'd never heard of them. She sent me, or maybe I was driving around with her in her car, and she put them on her stereo in her car. I was totally thrilled by that. This was Janet Stecher and Susan Lewis doing labor and women's music.

So when I first moved to Seattle, they said, "Oh, here's a couple of contacts. Try and find them." One of them was Ross Rieder, who was active in the labor movement and also kind of labor culture and music. And he invited me—this was in the first week I was in Seattle—to go hear a TV recording for, I think, public TV down in Tacoma to be part of the audience, just to be part of the audience. I heard Janet and Susan, I heard lots of other people who were singers in the Puget Sound kind of labor music community.

I made some connections. I ended up becoming a housemate of Janet Stecher's. Lived with her for three years. It was during that time that the Folklife Festival decided to invite Pete Seeger to come to Seattle in 1997. Janet was part of an effort to pull together a community chorus to back him up onstage. I was like right there. I was thrilled. This is like one of my childhood heroes. So, I got to be part of that. I got to be part of rehearsals with Pete Seeger. I got to be part of that performance. That was a highlight for me of my life.

I then stayed on with the Labor Chorus after that, after people decided to continue with it. So it was very, very, very exciting.

I would say that for me, now that I've doing this for almost 30 years in the labor movement, and frankly, we're speaking November 2016 and this is not an easy time to be part, not just of the labor movement, but any progressive work with the election of Donald Trump and a right-wing government at the federal level. And music is a huge part of helping me keep going. It's hard not to get depressed. We haven't been on the winning side for a long time.

In fact, when the results of the presidential election were becoming clear, I was actually with my mom watching the early results of the election. And, like almost everybody else I knew, I assumed that Hillary Clinton was going to win the presidency. And when it was becoming clear that Trump was going to win, it happened to be the night of the Labor Chorus rehearsal. I hadn't intended, frankly, to go to rehearsal that night. I was planning to stay with my mom, or to come home or do something else. And I needed to be with my people. I had to be. I could not face that on my own. I needed to go where like-minded people were doing labor music. That's what I needed to keep me going.

That's still the role that, I think, it plays for me, and it's the role that I play for other people, is using music as a source of both inspiration and motivation and solace, depending on the moment. That's it.

[00:15:27] **CINDY:** Okay, you're feeling finished?

[00:15:29] **MICHAEL:** I think so.

[00:15:31] **CINDY:** Thanks so much.

[00:15:32] **MICHAEL:** Sure.